

An Adult Education Course on African Novels

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Abstract

This study is about the importance of African authors in literature and the creation of an adult education course on African novels. It begins with my acknowledgement of a historian named David Olusoga and a novelist named Ben Okri. The first, Olusoga, produced a TV programme that gave me confidence that my idea for a course entitled African Novels could be successful. The second, Okri, wrote about how African Literature was the future. I will explain how I picked up their ideas and used them as a rationale for the course.

The Workers' Educational Association, for whom I produced the course, has a long history of student involvement. I have a great interest in both student autonomy and students taking part in their own learning. In my tutor role, I wanted African Novels to begin with a general idea about African authors and move to more specific books as the course proceeded. To this end, I began the course with an overview of the subject and a statement from the African novelist Chinua Achebe – to the effect that when you begin to identify with someone of a different colour and who even eats different food from you, then literature is really performing its wonders. I hoped that the students would carry out this identification.

The paper will use auto/biographical methods, as defined in Merrill and West (2009, p. 5), to tell the story of how this course was created during a teaching space when my adult education centre was closed by the pandemic. The course could only be delivered once tutors and students could meet again face to face, and I give an example of this. The paper will be supported by reference to my own extensive research on bibliotherapy and by an account of how I used autoethnography as a research method. Both of these ideas enabled the course to develop and grow through reading, research, practice and reflection, as I will show.

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Introduction

In this essay, I shall tell a story about how I created a literature course for adults on African novels. The art of storytelling or the narrative arc, which has been referred to a good deal during my years of writing ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) papers, will serve me well here. I look back at Merrill and West (2009, p. 10) referring to the heroic myths of successes in adult education and feel some personal identification with this. Their subsequent research has now become auto/biographic, which I have used in papers I have published, for example: *Norwegian Wood, The Language of Poetry and Song* (2018). I have also developed an interest in autoethnography as a research method prompted by Helen Woodley of Northumbria University, and with her help, I recently completed an engrossing read of Carolyn Ellis's book *The Ethnographic I* (2004). During this year's hybrid ESREA conference in Wroclaw, Helen presented how her own interest in autoethnography had developed. In her talk, she described how an autoethnography group was formed after a chance meeting on a train journey with another academic who was also interested in this research area. They learned they were going to the same conference and began discussing how they could further their interest. This resulted in the formation of the group of researchers at Northumbria University in which I now participate and which looks at ways of how autoethnographic methods can enhance research.

The WEA (Workers' Education Association), for whom I work, believes strongly in learner self-direction and, when I joined them at a later phase of my career, I was reminded of the theories of Malcolm Knowles (1975). In my M.A. dissertation (when I was training teachers), I became acquainted with his work, for instance: "The characteristics of andragogy, as opposed to pedagogy which can be linked to compulsory schooling, are that the learner is self-directed, has a fund of experience on which to draw, and is ready to learn because of a need to know, also the learner is directed to learning because of their life situation and is thus intrinsically motivated" (Leyland, 1994, p. 9).

I liked the idea of self-direction in adult learning, and when I joined the WEA as a teacher of literature in 2007, I drew on Knowles's ideas. Adults would join classes of the type I was offering – not because they wanted to get a job or a degree, but because they wanted to expand their understanding of themselves and the world. I refer to this in my ESREA paper *Bibliotherapy: Can Books Heal the Mind?*,

where I say that students engage with literature “to help ease the pain of existence, of being human” (2017, p. 1). I refer to this in more detail in *The Companionship of Books* (2021c, pp. 110-112), where I indicate how a personal theory regarding “bibliotherapy” has developed through teaching courses for adults. I link this to other studies of the effects of reading fiction and poetry such as Paula Byrne’s *relitfoundation.org* (2016). In this essay, I will use the *African Novels* course to illustrate how my thinking on this theory has developed further.

In *Discourse, dialogue and diversity in biographical research*, Bainbridge et al. (2021) say in their conclusion that “adult learning seems to happen while engaging with the other, which can mean another social actor, another idea or paradigm, another species, or the environment itself as otherness” (p. 219). They go on to define ‘the other’ as something that challenges our existence or balance. They make the point, which bears directly on the *African Novels* course I was teaching, that ‘the other’ – which lies within our psyches at an unconscious repressed level – might include “personal struggles (e.g., with colonial pasts)”.

Literature has a history of attempts to deal with our own “colonial pasts”. The most well-known example is *Heart of Darkness*, where Joseph Conrad attempts to show the brutality of Belgian colonialism in the late nineteenth century. There are other novels which refer to this past. In a recent series of articles, Sally Minogue, a lecturer in English Literature, looks at how Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Kipling’s *Kim* reflect aspects of British colonialism. *Kim*, for instance, which I know well from my boyhood reading, is a masterpiece of colonial literature. In her article *Kim* (from her Empire Series for Wordsworth Books), Sally Minogue reminds us that Hindustani was Kipling’s mother tongue and that he returned to India at 16, having been fostered out for ten years in Devon. She goes on to explain that Kipling, through the character of Kim, has the power to transcend the cultural boundaries between white and brown. Kipling has, she says, “the great [imaginative] strength of all writers – to lead us into a world which makes its own sense” (Minogue, 2022a).

In the third article from her series on British colonialism in English Literature, Sally Minogue writes about Edward Said’s argument in *Culture and Imperialism* that until the middle of the twentieth century, books such as *Mansfield Park* were written with an exclusively Western audience in mind – even when aspects of the book referred to “overseas territories held by Europeans” (Said, 1993, p. 78, as cited in Minogue, 2022b). Said urged that we read such novels with an effort to draw out “what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” in such works (Said, 1993, p. 78, as cited in Minogue, 2022b). Sally Minogue says

that in *Mansfield Park*, this applies to Sir Thomas Bertram's economic interest in Antigua, which came under British rule in 1632, and that by 1770, the slave population of Antigua was over half the native Carib population. When Fanny Price, Thomas Bertram's niece and the heroine of the novel, mentions the slave trade in Antigua during an evening conversation, there is "a dead silence". Additionally, Minogue argues that the subject of slavery, although often referred to, is allowed to be pushed to one side. She goes on to say that a recently published survey of Antigua's slave history provides material evidence of what life must have been like for enslaved people whose labour provided the means by which Sir Thomas Bertram ran the rich environment of Mansfield Park in England, where his family live (Minogue, 2022b). Edward Said says that we should re-examine texts in the manner described above, and I would argue that literature has a way of both challenging us with and reconciling us to such issues through which we can develop and grow.

To support this idea, in a recent article (*The Companionship of Books* [2021c] – which I produced as a result of writing a number of papers for ESREA), I look at how literature can amplify the ways in which we live our lives. By linking my growing perception of bibliotherapy with the autobiographical research methods that I was discovering, I was able to find some evidence for George Eliot's theory expressed in *The Natural History of German Life* (1856), and it is axiomatic to the bibliotherapist in that "art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (Eliot, 1856, p. 54).

I used the *African Novels* course to develop this idea further. An initial difficulty was that the group I was teaching had not met for some time because of the pandemic, so creating a course where students had some say in the input had become difficult. I will give an account of the planning and then use "autoethnography" to aid my telling of the story of how the course proceeded.

African Novels

The course on African novels was a response to a pre-pandemic request from my student group. As a starting point, I used the programme *Africa Turns the Page*, devised by David Olusoga for BBC 4 and shown in September 2020. In it, he described African writing, much of which was new to me. Although I had read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), I knew nothing of writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. This writer had witnessed first-hand the cruelty of colonialism in Kenya and – in 1964 – published a novel, *Weep Not Child*, which is about British

attempts to suppress the Mau Mau. A later novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1980), is a satire to illustrate how robbery from the African continent has made much of the success of the Western world possible.

I had read Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998), a historical work which recounts and analyses the horrors visited upon the Congolese by Belgium under King Leopold in the nineteenth century. I had also read Conrad's earlier fictional representation of this in *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), his novel being an attempt to depict the brutality of Belgian colonialism. Chinua Achebe, however, says in his essay (*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* [1977]) that, in Marlowe (the narrator of the story), not only do we have a man who represents the humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition, but what we also have is an ugly picture of the African community as viewed by a white man. He goes on to say that on the evidence of the way Africans are identified in the book, "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist". Re-reading the article makes it difficult to disagree with. It was one of the few times I have had to reconsider my opinion of a work of literature. I once thought *Heart of Darkness* was a great book, but I now have some reservations.

When I was studying *Heart of Darkness* with another WEA class, a particular student – who shared Achebe's criticism of Conrad's book – suggested we watch *Apocalypse Now* as a means of counterbalancing its specifically African and racist themes. The film *Apocalypse Now* (Ford Coppola, 1979), famously directed by Francis Ford Coppola, deals with the genocidal horror of the Congo that transposed to Vietnam. It moves from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Marlon Brando's portrayal of the character Kurtz. It is generally agreed to be an updating of the African colonial story – which has its origin in man's desire to benefit from the seizure of another country and the robbery of its land, either to increase its global reach or to exploit its riches. The contrast between the film and the book was discussed at length in the class and led to much learning about colonialism for both them and me.

By thoroughly reviewing such ideas in my mind, the course I was proposing on African novels gradually began to evolve. I read books by Ben Okri, Buchi Emecheta, Ngozi Adichie and Bernadine Evaristo, all of whom had been mentioned in David Olusoga's programme. Okri had written an article, *The Future is African Literature* (2020), which describes how African literature had altered world literature in the previous ten years by opening up stories of exile, migration and travel, as well as home-leaving and homecoming. The Nobel Prize for Literature has recently been awarded to Abdulrazak Gurnah from Tanzania for

his ten novels dealing with displacement and dislocation. One of these, *Afterlives* (2020), is a telling story of colonialism – not British or Belgian, but German. The novel is set in East Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century, when Germany ruled. Gurnah sets his novel against the backdrop of German atrocities such as the genocide in Namibia and the brutal quelling of the Maji Maji Uprising in Tanganyika. He tells of the terrible consequences of resistance to German rule.

Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature shortly before my *African Novels* course began, and this wasn't the only coincidence. The Booker Prize for Literature was also that year awarded to Damon Galgut, a South African writer whose novel *The Promise* (2021) dwelt on the consequences of the massive changes in his country after decades of white rule. The main difference was that Galgut, aside from all the novelists I have mentioned (including Emecheta and Evaristo, who were English), was white – and this began to beg the question for me: *What is an African Novel?* As one of my students later pointed out, Africa is a huge continent from which the novels we were reading are only a small part. I have recently, for example, been reading Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (1962), his famous series of novels about British colonial rule in Egypt.

The story of colonialism is one that resonates throughout history and is reflected in the literature of many countries. It is an idea that has shaped our Western understanding of the African continent. One of the books studied on the course was Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which is about a completely different experience of Africa to that covered by Laurence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*. In his novels, Chinua Achebe shows how the coming of white colonists forever changed the tribalism of countries like Nigeria, not for the better as was claimed by the white incomers, but infinitely for the worse as experienced by the native inhabitants.

Autoethnography

I decided to use autoethnography as a research method because I could not reach the teaching group in the ways I had used before (i.e., student learning records). I became part of an online group formed by Helen Woodley and Elaine Gregerson of Northumbria University. Helen Woodley had been interested in the method for some time and spoke about it at the 2022 ESREA conference – with the title *Whose Group is this Anyway?* (Woodley, 2022). The group had looked at a number of articles concerning autoethnography. One by Sara Delamont (2007), for instance, raised several issues. These included the ethics of writing about people who may not be able to give consent, the emphasis on the experiential rather

than the analytic and the self-involvement of the researcher at the expense of data collection.

A book recommended by members of the group, which puts forward a strong case for using autoethnography in research, is *The Ethnographic I* (2004) by Carolyn Ellis. This is subtitled *A methodological novel about autoethnography*, and the author takes the lives of a group of students whom she is teaching and the real-life issues which they are engaging with. These issues, under Ellis's guidance, become the subjects of their PhD research. So, we have Laura writing about her experiences with cancer, Leigh writing about her Jewish identity and Penny writing about her physical abuse. Hector, a pseudonym, writes about his bicultural identity.

Ellis suggests [to her students] that they are developing a narrative ethnography where the ethnographers' experiences are incorporated into the ethnographic description and analysis of others. Her emphasis is on *the ethnographic dialogue or encounter* between the narrator and members of the group being studied (2004, p. 48). She goes on later [in the book] to describe how she merges ethnography and fiction in order to illustrate truths that emerge from the interaction with her students.

The research by Helen Woodley and Elaine Gregerson's group into the value of autoethnography continues. Recently, Dr Liana Beattie of Edge Hill University published a book called *Symbiotic Autoethnography* (2022). She begins by referring to Denzin's statement on what autoethnography is not, including "personal narrative, life history life story, or personal experience" (Denzin, 2018), and goes on to explain how it differs from autobiography. She says that autoethnographers aim to critique their social, cultural and political contexts "through the lens of their personal experience": they share the same purpose as ethnographers but explicitly include their own reflections, feelings, emotions, confessions and doubts (2022, p. 12).

Beattie puts herself into the framework as an evocative autoethnographer like Carolyn Ellis rather than that of an analytic one. Whereas evocative ethnographers use personal stories to evoke an emotional response to issues being examined, analytic autoethnographers are committed to a more traditional research practice. Evocative autoethnographers, says Le Roux, lean towards researcher introspection from which readers are expected to connect with the researcher's emotions and experience (2017, p. 199).

This, I hope, answers the question – to some extent – of whether an essay such as this is an auto/biography, autobiography or autoethnography. The first is defined

in Merrill and West (2009). They say that the term was created in order to show the connection “between the construction of one’s own life through autobiography and the construction of the life of another through biography” (2009, p. 31). The authors suggest that we cannot write stories about ourselves without referring to and thus constructing others’ lives and selves. The constructions we make of those others’ lives “will contain and reflect our own histories and social and cultural locations as well as psychologies” (2009, p. 31). At the risk of being specious, I will say that my own story of a boy growing up as the eldest of a widowed mother of three children in 1960s Liverpool contains divergences from what one might regard as the middle-class family norm. These divergences arose from the situation that I was in, and I have written about them in articles for Authors Electric over the past three years. Whatever I have written about others will undoubtedly be affected by elements of my personal history.

Autobiography, on the other hand, is simply telling a story about oneself and does not engage in the reflection which my pieces include. To illustrate the difference further, I will make reference to a monumental reflective memoir by French author Annie Ernaux, called *The Years* (2008/2017). Ernaux writes about her life in such a way as to set the spread of her 80+ years against a life of growing up in post-war France during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and beyond, with all the cultural and political explosions of change that took place for women during that time. I am currently using the book for an ESREA paper on *Lifescapes – Landscapes – Timescapes*, which is the title of our next conference in Trondheim, Norway (2023).

Autoethnography is a relatively new idea that combines an element of auto/biography and autobiography. It is very reflective. In her article, Le Roux makes a strong case for evocative autoethnography. It is the evocative type, she argues, which makes a story into a story (referencing Ellis and Bochner [2006]). “The main goal of evocative autoethnography is to use narrative to evoke emotion and take the reader to depths of personal feeling and sympathetic understanding” (Le Roux, 2017, p. 199).

I have responded to the idea of autoethnography as it fits well with my own experience as a reader and a writer of literature. In Ellis’s (2004), I found many echoes of those monthly blog posts for Authors Electric about my ideas on “bibliotherapy”. In April last year, I wrote a piece called *Spanish Lessons* that used ideas from the ESREA 2022 conference combined with my reading of Spanish literature and the present war in Ukraine to write an evocative piece about the horrors of war. This has now been edited by Patric Wallin for the 2023 ESREA

conference (Leyland, 2022). I have also written a blog post called *Dealing with the Dog* (2021a), where I show how literature has helped me to deal with issues such as death, relationship breakdown, illness and disability – all of which many of us have experienced. My own experience of these issues sometimes led to depressive episodes which led me to formulate a bibliotherapeutic theory of how literature can be used to deal with some of the unhappiness of life.

For some time, I have been researching the subject of bibliotherapy with reference to the literature courses that I teach, such as this one on African novels. I used a quotation from Chinua Achebe at the beginning of that course to illustrate the powerful effect that literature can have on us, as I will describe. Similarly, James Baldwin has written of how “it was books that taught me that the things which tormented me most were the very things that connected me with the people who were alive” in *Life Magazine* (Howard, 1963). In *The Ethnographic I*, Carolyn Ellis says that you can’t be an autoethnographer without doing autoethnography (2004, p. 119), and so my blogs are part of the autoethnographic experience. In her book, Ellis brings herself seamlessly into her narrative, using a different typeface to give the reader extracts, such as where Penny performs the drama of her domestic abuse for the rest of the class – which, incidentally, is quite harrowing (2004, pp. 219-229). Following her lead and for the purposes of this essay, I will use an extract from the blog I wrote on *African Novels* as a piece of autoethnography to illustrate the interaction I had with my students. The course was the final one in a series that I had given over a number of years, and the student group consisted of 14 adults – some of whom I had met before on previous literature courses and others who were new to me.

Autoethnographic Extract²

The pandemic meant that I had not met my WEA group for two years and, in that intervening time, we had all become older and less able to travel. Now they arrive in taxis, and today I arrive at the venue only just before them, having had to negotiate unforeseen roadworks and a very low and bright sun. Today, coincidentally, is the second session on *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. For this, I have listened to the author being interviewed on the World Book Club, made some notes and written a chapter-by-chapter summary of the novel. It is the harrowing story of the Biafran War, which took place in the 1960s – an event of which I have my own dim memory and which one or two of

² Names have been changed

the group remember too, although many of them were too busy raising families to have any real recollection of the events depicted.

And some of these are, as I said, harrowing – Olanna’s journey by train as she returns from finding the dead bodies of her uncle and aunt and seeing the woman sitting next to her with her baby’s head in a calabash, and Richard leaving on a flight from the airport and witnessing the bloody massacre of a group of Igbo people by Nigerian soldiers. The story, as Adichie said in the World Book Club interview, is one that she had to tell.

I began the course last week with a quotation from Chinua Achebe, another Nigerian writer:

“I tell my students, it is not difficult to identify with somebody like yourself, somebody next door that looks like you.

What’s more difficult is to identify with someone you don’t see, who’s very far away, who’s a different colour, who eats a different kind of food.

When you begin to do that, then literature is really performing its wonders.”

We have now looked at Achebe’s book *Things Fall Apart*, and I have summarised events for the group. They were not always impressed by my interpretation of the story:

“What about all the women?”, asked David. Yes, he was right, for I have concentrated my teaching on the story of Okonkwo – a tragic character of Shakespearean dimensions who, in the novel, suffers a series of defeats and who, at the end, takes his own life. I have neglected the story of Ekwefi (his second wife), all of whose children were either stillborn or suffered an early death until the arrival of Ezinma – who survives. Do we all read books differently, I wonder, depending on who we are?

We have tackled *July’s People* by Nadine Gordimer (1981). This is the story of a white South African family sheltered by their black houseboy during the chaotic violence that engulfs the country after the apartheid system is overthrown. If you know the book, this is an imagined story that Gordimer wrote to explore the predicament of liberal whites caught up in the changes that swept across South Africa before the 1984 state of emergency. The ending of the novel is amazing as Maureen runs towards the sound of a helicopter landing in the distance. Will she reach it and escape her white middle-class family responsibilities that the author seems to be asking?

My class has ended. Laura and Greta are my longest-serving students. Greta, who is now 93 and unable to walk unaided, takes my arm and I help her over the uneven ground of the car park to where her taxi awaits. Once in the taxi with three

of the other students, it drives away and I return to the centre, shutting the windows and turning off the heating and the lights. Today, everyone has managed to stack their chairs. I close the door and return the key to the coded box on the wall.

Analysis

I used the above extract to help me analyse what happened in the classes. I thought that literature did indeed perform its wonders – as Achebe suggests – and I achieved a feeling of some satisfaction at the end. It happened like this. I had asked students to talk about leading characters from the four novels. To my surprise and delight, four men and three women volunteered (about half the class). They gave their presentations on the characters of Okonkwo, July, Maureen, Kainene, Odenigbo, Lucia and Babamukuru. All were excellent, showing a grasp of the complexities of characterisation in the novels and were followed by lengthy discussion. From the example that I quote above, you might see that I was more interested in the stories or plots of the novels rather than the characters. In the presentations, I felt that I was being given a lesson by the students about what they really wanted from the books. It was the characters they were interested in rather than how stories unfolded. I thought back to Bainbridge et al., who, in their conclusion, mention the “idea or paradigm...that challenges our existence or balance” and “where most adult learning seems to happen” (Bainbridge et al., p. 219). This is found in the anti-colonialist stance taken by writers like Achebe and the near-genocidal account of the Biafran War as retold in Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This is ‘the other’ that my students wished to engage with and which I hoped I was leading them towards.

Taking the idea further, ‘the other’ can be what Achebe is dealing with in the quotation from him that I had used and shown in the extract. Identifying with people “unlike ourselves” is when “literature is performing its wonders”, as he put it in a discussion about proverbs, with his students referenced in *Being and Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress* (Nyamnjoh, 2021). This ‘other’ is when you identify with a character who is a different colour and who eats different food. It was clear from the excellence of the presentations that my students had made this identification before they gave their talks about the characters they had chosen.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for me to carry out the normal WEA assessment of the success of the course using student learning records as I normally do because the pandemic had disrupted the WEA system. However, in her book, Ellis refers to the use of letters, emails and conversations as evidence for autoethnographers

(2004, p. 193). It is an example of how one can gather evidence. In a letter sent to me by ‘Greta’, one of the students in my autoethnographic extract, I found this:

“The Friday classes have been a great feature in my life and, of course, you have been the tutor for fifteen years. A long time...
So, thank you for introducing me to lots of books I would never have found on my own. I certainly wouldn’t have found and enjoyed African books...
Reading is one of the comforts in my life, and you have certainly enriched it.”

Conclusions

I return to my narrative arc referred to at the beginning of this essay. As the narrator, I have told a complex story of how an adult education course can be created and taught. I have interwoven [within this story] information about colonialism and its impact on African communities as depicted in certain novels, some discussion of autoethnography as a research method and of “bibliotherapy”, as well as a little about myself (i.e., the storyteller). The above letter from ‘Greta’ is part of my story and, although it only relates to one student’s experience, indicates how literature courses can be transformative for adults. In the same narrator’s role, I now reference Laurel Richardson – of whose book *Fields of Play* (1997) Carolyn Ellis says: “Brilliantly and creatively connects autobiography and theory, the personal self and the academic self, poststructuralism and the concrete details of everyday experience.” Her words are a good description of how autoethnography works and will add to what I have already said about the evocative aspect of the theory.

Richardson goes on to say that the validity of autoethnography can be likened to a crystal which has a number of shapes and sizes. “What we see depends on our angle of vision” (1997, p. 92). My angle of vision is that the interaction between teachers and learners is an art that can be co-created, as I have shown here. The autoethnographic element in my essay has, I hope, enabled *you* as a reader to see how my students and I were learning about African novels and colonialism together in an interactive group. The essay will also tell you something about my study of “bibliotherapy” in relation to literature, which I hope to take further in future ESREA meetings.

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